STRAWSON'S 'PRESUPPOSITION' - A REVIEW

Amit Kr Sen

If Paul says: "All John's childern are asleep", it appears to any reflective mind that Paul knows that John has childern. If Paul knows that John has no children and nevertheless makes this remark, then under normal circumstances this would be improper because this can neither be true nor be false. Thus existence of John's children is a necessary condition for an assignment of any truth value to Paul's remark.

P. F. Strawson a common-sense logician at this stage makes a distinction between the notion of 'Entailment' and the notion of 'Presupposition'.[1] This distinction follows from two kinds of logical absurdities. Strawson explains these logical absudities in this way : There are two statements, say S snd S'. Now if S' is the necessary condition for the truth simply of S and if one asserts 'S' and not 'S' in the same sentence, then there will be one kind of logical absurdity. But if S' is the necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S and if one asserts 'S' and 'not S' 'in the same sentence then there will be another kind of logical absurdity. Strawson points out that this second kind of absurdity is different from the first kind which he calls 'a straight forward self-contradiction'. The relation between S and S' in the first case where S' is the necessary condition for the truth simply of S is called Entailment. But the relation between S and S' in the second case where S' is the necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S' is called Presupposition

Strawson's realistic solution[1] to the problem of existential import of categorical proposition is based on his distinction between the notion of entailment and the notion of prespposition. In realistic solution an interpretation of the doctrine of existential import is given in a way different from the orthodox

interprtation. According to the orthodox interprretation a categorical proposition has existental import with respect to the subject term in the sense that it entails existence of the object denoted by the subject term. But Strawson's interpretation is that a categorical proposition has existential import with respect to the subject term in the sense that it presupposes existence of the object denoted by the subject term.

Strawson explains the difference between entailment and presupposition of existence by saying that in the case of entailment, existence of the object denoted by the subject term is a necessary condition for the truth only of the proposition in question. But in the case of presupposition, existence of the object denoted by the subject term is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of the proposition in question.

What are the consquences of this difference between entailment and presupposition? One consequence of this difference is that under the first interpretation if the existence-condition is not fulfilled i.e., if the object denoted by the subject term does not exist, a categorical proposition would be false. But under the second interpretation if the existence-condition is not fulfilled, a categorical proposition would be neither true nor false but pointless or truth value gap. Another consequence of this difference is that under the first interpretation, from a categorical proposition we can infer the existence of the object denoted by the subject term but such an inference is not possible under the second interpretation.

Now the question is why Strawson has rejected the entailment theory of the existential import of proposition and advocated the presupposition theory? Strawson's point is that what is a necessary cóndition for the truth or falsity of a proposition can not be said to be entailed by it. He thinks that as existence of John's children is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of the proposition "All John's childern are asleep", it cannot be said that the preposition "All John's childern are asleep" entails existence of John's childern but only presupposes it. One truth about entailment is that if the entailed proposition is false, the entailing proposition is also false. Let us take S to stand for "All John's children are asleep" and S' for "Existence of John's children". Now if S entails S' then if S' is false S is also false. But Strawson thinks that in our everyday discourse there are circumstances under which S' is false but S is not false but

only pointless or inderterminate. In that case we cannot say that S entails S'. What Strawson had in mind is that if S is false, S is as if it had never been stated. Now, the question of truth or falsity does not arise with regard to such a statement which is as if it has never been stated.

It is a pertinent question to ask why Strawson is interested in the presupposition theory as an interpretation of existential import of categorical propostion. Strawson's intention is.to develop a logic of ordinary language as against formal logic. In this logic Strawson explains that he has no objection to the construction of formal system as such.But formal systems are useful in appraising 'context free' discourse as exemplified,say, in mathematics and in physics. A formal logic, according to Strawson, however, needs to be supplimented by a logic of everyday discourse because formal logic is incapable of coping with the complexities of ordinary language. Logic of everyday discourse, Strawson thinks, is possible only if existential import of proposition is interpreted by the presupposition theory. Moreover, Strawson thinks that traditional logic can be saved from the attack of the formal logician by his presupposition theory. Presupposition theory, he thinks, is the best way of defending the laws of traditional logic.

Prof. G. W. Roberts has raised a problem in Strawson's theory of presupposition.[2] For Strawson a statement S' presupposes another statement S, if S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S. On the other hand, a statment S entails another statement S', if S' is a necessary condition for the truth simply of S. Roberts asks us to suppose that a certain statement S presupposes another statement S'. Consider in this case the statement 'S is true or false'. Does this latter statment presuppose or entail S assuming that S presupposes S'? In some cases at least, Roberts thinks, the statement that S is true or false does not presuppose S'. Roberts want to say that Strawson's notion of presupposition itself presupposes entailment. If 'S presupposes S' ' means that S, is the necessary condition for the truth or falisty of S, then Robert's point is that S' must be a necessary condition for the truth simply of S, so, S, inorder to presuppose S, must entail S, which Strawson's definition of presupposition is meant to avoid.

Robert's argument may be reconstructed formally as follows and we shall call it argument (A). S pressposes S' which means:

(1) $(S \ V\!-\!S) \rightarrow S'$ But if this is true , then by a logical law it follows:

(2) $[(S \ V\!-\!S) \rightarrow S'] \ \rightarrow \ [(S \rightarrow S') \ \& \ (-\!S \rightarrow S')]$

(3) $[(S \rightarrow S') \ \& \ (-\!S \rightarrow S')]$ .... 2,1. *M.P.*

(4) $S \rightarrow S'$ .... 3, simp.

But in defining S presupposes S' Strawson is at pains to deny S $\rightarrow$ S?

The plausibilty of this reduction of 'S presupposes S' to '$S \rightarrow S'$', Roberts himself admits, depends upon a logical law used in step (1). But the use of the logical law in step (1) itself, as Prof. Nelkin[3] points out, rests on the assumption that Strawson in saying S' is presupposed for the truth or falisty of S is using the connective 'or' in the non-exclusive sense. But as Nelkin argues, Strawson does not allow even for the logical possibility of a sentence, say S, being both true and false at the same time. Which the non-exclusive sense of 'or' would allow. Strawson's use of 'or' is definitely in an exclusive sense and in this sense his assumption in step(1) above would be:

(1') $[(S, \ V\!-\!S), \ \& \ -(S \ \& \ -S)] \ \Longrightarrow \ S'$

And from this assumption it does not follow that

(2') $\{[(S, \ V\!-\!S) \ \& \ -(S\& \ -S')] \ \rightarrow \ S'\} \rightarrow [(S \rightarrow S') \ \& \ (-S \rightarrow S')]$

and so thus step(3) and (4) above by M.P. and simplification do not follow. Thus Nelkin proves that Strawson's theory of presupposition does not collapse into S entail S' and Roberts attack misses the target.

In examining Roberts argument against Strawson's theory of presuppositioin Prof. R.H. Kane had pointed out that 'S entails S' may be defined in two ways.[4] In one sense (hereafter. E_1) 'S entails S'=Df. S' is the necessary condition for the truth of S.In another sense (hereafter E_2) 'S entails S'=Df.(i) S' is the necessary condition for the truth of S and (ii) it is not the case that S' is the necessary condition for the falsity of S.

If S entails S' is defined in term of E_1, then it is not incompatiable with S presupposes S' which is defined as (i) S' is the necessary condition for the truth of S and (ii) is the necessary condition for the falsity of S. Because here S entails S' is a necessary condition for the truth of 'S presupposes S' '. But

if S entails S' is defined in terms of E_1 then it is indeed incompatible with S presupposes S' and this incompatibility becomes clear if we look at part (ii) of the definition of E_2 and of presuppositon. And Roberts in saying that 'the statement that S' is true or false has a necessary condition but not as a presupposition, the statement S' is in fact arguing that E_2 must be used in the argument(A).

Prof. Kane would like to show that if the argument (A) is written in terms of E_2 then it would be an invaild argument because the logical law Roberts used in step (1) of the argument (A) does not hold for E_2. It is this logical law by which step (2) follows from step (1)in argument (A). Let us therefore rewrite step (2) in terms of E_2. Step (2) has two parts,the entailing part and the entailed part. The entailing part in terms of E_2 will be : S' is the necessary condition for the truth of 'S' is true or S is false' and it is not the case that S' is a necessary condition for the falsity of 'S is true or S is false '. And the entailed part in terms of E_2 will be: S' is a necessary condition for the truth of 'S is true' and it is not the case that S' is a necessary condition for the falsity of 'S is true'; and S' is a necessary condition for the truth of 'S is false and it is not the case that S' is a necessary condition for the falsity of 'S is false'.

Kane shows that the entailed part of step (2) involves self- contradiction and to do so he takes the help of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (hereafter *P.N.C*) according to which: Not both P & $-P$. Now the entailed part in terms of E_2 may be symbolised as follows to show that it violates *P.N.C*:

$$\{(S \to S') \ \& \ -(-S \to S')\} \ \& \ \{(-S \to S') \ \& \ -(S \to S')\}$$

Here the first and the fourth conjuncts and the second and the third conjuncts are contradictory to each other. Thus if we rewrite step (2) in terms of E_2, it becomes self-contradictory. Prof. Kane, therefore, concludes that E_2 does not satisfy the logical law used by Roberts in his argument to prove that S in order to presuppose S' must entail S'. It is to be pointed out that this conclusion of Kane has nothing to do with Strawson's theory of presupposition because the contradiction comes simply from the logic form of step (2) of the argument (A) and the logical law used by Roberts. If we write the argument in terms of E_1 no contradiction arises in the argument but as we have said, if we write the argument in terms of E_1, no problem arises for Strawson's theory of presupposition.

F.H.Donell[5] also rejects Robert's criticism of Strawson's theory of presupposition. He distinguishes between two ways of considering S in the statement "S is true or false' entails S'". On the one hand, S' may be so understood that the statement it stands for need not be either true or false. Then 'S is true or false' will be a contingent statement and S' is false will entail a further contingent statement that S is neither true nor false which means S is truth value less. On the other hand, S may be so understood that the statement it stands for is either true or false. In that case "S' is true or false 'entails S'" must mean that S' follows from a tautology, S' is false will entail a contradiction that S is both true and false. Donnell names the statement "'S is true or false ' entails S' " as statement A in the former sense and as statement B in the latter sense. Donnell then argues that it is "'S is true or false' entails S" understood as A and B that gives the criterion of 'S presupposes S'. It is only then 'S is false' may entail the contingent statement that S is truth value less in the Strawsonian sense.

Robert's conclusion that S' must be a necessary condition for the truth simply of S which means 'The truth of S entails S' ' may also be interpreted in two senses depending on the sense in which S is interpreted. Donnell names the two senses A' and B'. In A', S is taken as statement which need not necessarily be truth-valued. In this sense 'S' is false' will entail the statement that is 'S is true' is false. But this is not equivalent to 'S is false' since it may also mean 'S is truth valueless'. In B' is taken as necessarily either true or false. In that case, S is false will follow from S' is false. A indeed follows from A and not B'. Thus what follows is that " 'S' is false' entails 'S is true' is false. " 'S is true is false'' just means 'S is false or truth valueless'. B' does not follow from A. B entailing B is not a criterion of 'S presupposes S' ' as Roberts took it to be.

I think, it is Donnell and not Roberts who rightly represented Strawson's line of thinking. Donnell in his analysis has rightly made a distinction between the language of presupposition and the language of entailment. This important distinction has always to be borne in mind in order to have a clear and precise understanding of the theory of presupposition. But if Roberts fails to make this distinction Strawson himself has to bear responsibilty for it. Because it is he who has introduced the notion of presupposition in the language of entailment when he defined 'S presupposes S' ' as 'S' is the necessary condition for the

truth or falisty of *S'*. Donnell also defines '*S* presupposes *S'* as '*S* is truth-valued entails *S'*. Once this is done, there is no escape from the logic of entailment and its laws and I wonder if one can present the theory of presupposition in any language other than of the logic of entailment.[6]

NOTES

1. 'Strawson in his *Introduction to Logical Theory* has offered two solutions to the problem of existential import of categorical proposition, one is the ad-hoc formalistic solution and the other is the realistic solution.

2. G.W.Roberts : 'A problem about presupposition,' (*Mind*, Vol.78, April, 1969.)

3. N. Nelkin : 'Mr. Roberts on Strawson' (*Mind*, Vol. 81, 1972.)

4. R. H. Kane : 'Presupposition and Entailment' (*Mind*, Vol. 81, 1972.)

5. F. H. Donnell : 'A note about presupposition' (*Mind*, Vol. 81, 1972.)

   I have also made use of the following in preparing this paper:

6. P. K. Sen : "Analysis of General Proposition" (*I. P. Q.* Jan. 1978)

7. A. Dav : "Strawson's Interpretation of Traditional Forms."(*Journal of the Indian Academy of Phil.*, Vol.XVIII,1979)

8. A. B. Randeria: "The Laws of Traditional Logic And the Interpretation Problem," (*I. P. Q.* Vol. V, April 1978).

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY
PUBLICATIONS

Daya Krishna and A. M. Ghose (eds) **Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives,** R.s 10/-

S. V. Bokil (Tran) **Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone.** Rs. 25/-

A. P. Rao, **Three Lectures on John Rawls,** Rs. 10/-

Ramchandra Gandhi (cd) **Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization,** Rs. 50/-

S. S. Barlingay, **Beliefs, Reasons and Reflection,** Rs. 70/-

Daya Krishna, A. M. Ghose and P. K. Srivastav (eds) **The Philosophy of Kalidas Bhattacharyya,** Rs. 60/-

M. P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P. P. Gokhale (eds) **Studies in Jainism,** Rs. 50/-

R. Sundara Rajan, **Innovative Competence and Social Change,** Rs. 25/-

S. S. Barlingay (ed), A. **Critical Survey of Completed Research Work in Philosophy in Indian University (upto 1980), Part I,** Rs. 50/-

R. K. Gupta, **Exercises in Conceptual Understanding,** Rs. 25/-

Vidyut Aklujkar, **Primacy of Linguistic Units.** R.s 30/-

Rajendra Prasad, **Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language** Rs. 100/-

Contact : The Editor,
Indian Philosophical quarterly,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Poona,
Pune 411 007.